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Outside the Magic Circle of White Male Supremacy in the Jim Crow South: Virginia Foster Durr's Memoirs¹

ABSTRACT

Virginia Foster Durr was born in 1903 in Birmingham, Alabama in a former planter class family, and in spite of the gradual decline in the family fortune, she was brought up as a traditional southern belle, utterly subjected to the demands of the ideology of white male supremacy that ruled the Jim Crow South. Thus, she soon learnt that in the South a black woman could not be a lady, and that as a young southern woman she was desperately in need of a husband. It was not until she had fulfilled this duty that she began to open her eyes to the reality of poverty, injustice, discrimination, sexism and racism ensuing from the set of rules she had so easily embraced until then. In *Outside the Magic Circle*, Durr describes the process that made her aware of the gender discrimination implicit in the patriarchal southern ideology, and how this realization eventually led her to abhor racial segregation and the ideology of white male supremacy. As a consequence, in her memoirs she presents herself as a rebel facing the social ostracism resulting from her determination to fight against gender and racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South. This article delves into Durr's composed textual self as a rebel, and suggests the existence of a crack in it, rooted in her inability to discern the real effects of white male supremacy on the domestic realm and in her subsequent blindness to the reality behind the mammy stereotype.

Keywords: Virginia Foster Durr, white male supremacy, mammy, Jim Crow South, life-writing.

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When Virginia Foster Durr was born in 1903, her paternal family still owned a plantation in Union Springs, Alabama, where former slaves and their descendants worked and lived at the service of Granny Foster, whom Durr describes in her memoirs as a perfect incarnation of the antebellum plantation lady. In spite of the decline in the family fortune and the subsequent loss of the family plantation after her grandmother's death when she was eight, Durr was brought up as a true descendant of the former planter class, which in Alabama in the first decades of the twentieth century meant that she was trained to support and share the white male supremacist ideology that characterized the New South in the segregation period. Fortunately, Durr's later experiences in the 1930s and 1940s among the New Dealers in Washington, DC, as well as her active involvement in the fight against the poll tax had an everlasting effect on her ideological development, since they made her aware of the gender and racial injustice ensuing from the ideology of white male supremacy in the South. As a consequence, after her return to Alabama in 1951 she became an active supporter of black people's struggle for their civil rights. In *Outside the Magic Circle. The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (1985)² Durr records the events that determined this ideological development from her early blind acceptance of the white male supremacist doctrines to her final involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

In his foreword to this volume, Studs Terkel recalls Durr's conviction that "there were three ways for a well-brought-up young Southern white woman to go":

She could be the actress, playing out the stereotype of the Southern belle. . . . If she had a spark of independence or worse, creativity, she could go crazy. . . . Or she could be the rebel. She could step *outside the magic circle*, abandon privilege, and challenge this way of life." (xi, emphasis added)

According to Terkel, "[i]t is the third road Virginia Durr travelled" (xi), and in fact in her autobiography Durr consciously aligns herself with this model, as the title of the volume makes clear. The present study distinguishes several stages in Durr's ideological development: I suggest that Durr's realization of the poverty and misery around her at the outset of the Great Depression did not destabilize her regional allegiance to the traditional southern mores immediately; such an allegiance was not disturbed until she began to glimpse the pernicious effects of the southern tradition and laws on southern white women's (political) rights, and then it was violently

² Hereafter cited as *OMC*.

shaken when she discovered the tacit collusion between many “respectful” southern gentlemen and the big corporations to exploit workers. But Durr’s definitive step out of the magic circle was still to come: she was a descendant of the old planter class and the South could tolerate her “eccentricities” as far as she did not cross the color-line, which she literally did when she began to side with those that opposed segregation. This eventually led her to “ostracism, bruises of all sorts, and defamation” (xi) as befits the role of rebel according to Terkel in his foreword. Thus, most of the events and information recorded in Durr’s autobiographical account contribute to her personal construction of a self that fits this rebel model almost to perfection. But inevitably, as Paul John Eakin has suggested, “the self that is at the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3; qtd in Rueda-Ramos 26), and Durr’s autobiography is no exception.

Modern scholars on life-writing usually agree that writing an autobiography constitutes not only an act of self-discovery, but also one of self-(re)creation, self-invention or self-construction. In Prenshaw’s terms, “an autobiography is not a life. It is a text, a product of memory and imagination, the effort of one storyteller to fashion a coherent plot from the episodic events that make up a life” (“Memoirs’ Characters” 149).³ As suggested above, in Durr’s autobiography the composed textual self is mainly that of a rebel southern woman, but there is a crack in this constructed rebel self which scholars such as Fred Hobson or Peggy Whitman Prenshaw have also noticed:⁴ the present study explores the possibility of locating this crack revealing the “more diffuse self” “shadowing behind . . . [Durr’s]

³ In the case of Durr’s memoir, such an effort had to be supplemented by the careful editorial work accurately described in the “Editor’s Note”: Durr’s autobiography results from the complex interaction of her oral autobiographical accounts in several interviews, filtered through her memory and imagination and shaped according to her skillful resources as a storyteller, and the choices, selection and organization of this material by a set of interviewers and editors who, as Barnard claims, made strong efforts not to “[edit] out the twinkle in her eye and the hearty chuckle freely given” (xix). Since the purpose of this study is not to explore the interstices of editorial work, I will assume that, as Barnard states, “[t]he book is Virginia’s own telling” (xviii), and the resulting composed self is mainly her creation.

⁴ Hobson and Prenshaw show reticence when analyzing the actual extent of Durr’s ideological turn. From Hobson’s perspective “in her adherence to manners she still belonged to the world of her fathers and mothers,” and she remained to the end a “racial paternalist, to some extent” and “a firm believer in breeding” (125); Prenshaw agrees when she states that “*Outside the Magic Circle* is arguably mistitled, for Virginia Durr never really feels herself outside the circle of those who ‘run the country,’ as she admits” (*Composing Selves* 162).

textual self” as a rebel (Prenshaw, *Composing Selves* 29) in her “clinging to mammy”; or in other words, in her actual inability to fully overcome one of the features which, according to Terkel, she herself identified as essential in the stereotype of the southern belle: being “gracious to ‘the colored help’” (xi). In spite of Durr’s sincere abhorrence of segregation, in her autobiography she never considers the effects of racism and white supremacy on the domestic realm and as a result she remains to the end blind to the truth behind the mammy myth. Even so, Durr’s ideological evolution was more than remarkable, and her contribution to the fight for the Civil Rights of African Americans deserves recognition.

As Durr herself acknowledges in her autobiography, the period of time that she spent living in Washington, DC with her family between 1933 and 1949 represented a turning point in her ideological development. She and her husband, Clifford Durr, moved there in April 1933 almost immediately after F. D. Roosevelt had taken office in March (*OMC* 89), and it was then that she became gradually aware not only of the effects of the Great Depression all over the country but also of the effects of the pervasive ideology of white male supremacy in the South. In his analysis of Durr’s autobiography as one of racial conversion Fred Hobson affirms that she found “segregation altogether unacceptable as early as the 1930s” (124) and explains her awakening to the evils of racism and segregation just by referring to the shocking effects of her realization of the poverty and misery caused by the Depression. But reading Durr’s own words one notices that she experienced her “racial conversion”—to use Hobson’s terms—not as such an immediate reaction to the effects of the economic situation, but as the consequence of a gradual process comprising a series of stages related not only to race issues but also to gender, regional, and political ideologies. In fact, her first reaction to the horrors of the Great Depression did not even disturb her southern racist ideology at all.

As Durr recollects, before moving to Washington, “I still wasn’t really in contact with the terrible poverty, hunger and distress around me, but I was beginning to see it” (*OMC* 78). In fact, she had started to open her eyes to the misery around her while in hospital in Birmingham after she suffered a miscarriage in 1931, where horrified she could witness the effects of the lack of calcium on children (*OMC* 76–77). From this period Durr bitterly remembers how poor people blamed themselves for their misery instead of the corporations which had caused their ruin: “What bothered me most was that these poor people blamed themselves for their situation. They never said, ‘We are destitute because U.S. Steel doesn’t treat us well as they treat mules’” (*OMC* 79). Just before moving to Washington, Durr attended the Junior League Convention in Philadelphia as vice-president of the Junior League in Birmingham, and there she was again enraged by the same generalized attitude:

That was a great word people used—improvident. You hadn't provided for the future, you see. You were poor and it was your own fault. No one in Birmingham blamed the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. Even the people out of work didn't blame them. Now, I did. By that time, I was getting furious at these Yankee corporations. (*OMC* 89)

Durr's reference to her youthful anger at "these Yankee corporations" is probably sarcastic, but it is especially meaningful since it suggests that her process of initiation into the socioeconomic problems affecting so many people around her in the South was deeply rooted in her feeling of allegiance to her region: like her contemporaries, the Nashville Agrarians, at this stage of her life Durr seems to have blamed mainly the northern industrial system for the socioeconomic injustice she was beginning to witness around her, regardless of the racist and sexist effects of the prevailing ideology of white male supremacy in the South. By laying all the blame on "these Yankee corporations" she somehow aligned herself with those who saw the situation mainly in regional terms, and thus she seems to have considered that the ultimate cause for the surrounding misery in the South was the spread of northern industrialism. Durr's adoption of such an ideological stand at this stage in her life is a natural effect of her having been brought up as a descendant of the old planter class under the auspices of the ideology of white male supremacy.

Durr's depiction of the first thirty years of her life in Part One of her autobiography hardly deviates from other traditional accounts of growing up as a white girl in a former planter class family in the segregated South. She describes her childhood memories of the holidays spent in the family plantation in Union Springs, Alabama, presided over by her grandmother and her faithful former slave Easter; she recollects a state of racial innocence when she could freely play with Sarah—the daughter of her beloved mammy, Nursie—and other black children; she remembers the painful experience of losing Nursie, her mammy, as a symbolical manifestation of the end of this period of racial innocence and the beginning of her blind adoption of the ideology of white male supremacy, which taught her on the one hand that "you can't call a black woman a lady" (*OMC* 19) and on the other that as a young woman she was desperately in need of a husband (*OMC* 66). As she herself acknowledges,

[w]hile I was being brought up to be attractive and to have a lot of beaux and get married, all around me things were happening—antilynching fights and child labor fights and the suffrage movement. It was only after I was safely married that I could really be interested in anything else. (*OMC* 66)

It was in the early years of her marriage to Clifford Durr, while she was “leading the life of a young married woman in Birmingham,” that she became “more and more aware of the terrible state of the economy” (*OMC* 74), for which she blamed the “Yankee corporations,” as suggested above. Eventually, she moved to Washington after Clifford had been offered a job there, which gave her the opportunity of meeting a lot of people who were actively involved in the New Deal, so she “decided [she] wanted to do something, too” (*OMC* 99). And her first option was volunteering for the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee, since Mrs Roosevelt, whom Durr deeply admired, worked for this Committee. Durr enjoyed working as a volunteer for the Women’s Division, and this proved an ideologically fruitful experience for her, since it gave her the chance to cast a glance over the political situation of women in the South. As she explains, “[t]he people in the Women’s Division were particularly worried about the South because there were no Southern women in any Democratic committees—local, city, or state,” so they “made quite a study of the South and decided the problem was the poll tax” (*OMC* 101). The poll tax caused serious restrictions on women’s political rights in the South, since in practice it limited their access to their voting rights, and Durr became gradually engaged in the struggle against this discriminatory tax. In her autobiography she identifies this early attitude as proof of her growing concern with the conditions of life of white women in the South, and even of her “becoming something of a feminist” (*OMC* 103). As she explains:

I had had a great resentment, I now realize, of the role that Southern girls had to play. Nice Southern girls were supposed to try to get husbands, and so they were always fooling the men and being pleasant and putting up with almost anything to be popular. My resentment hadn’t come to the surface yet. It was still gestating inside of me. But I must have felt it, because I plunged into the fight to get rid of the poll tax for the women of the South with the greatest gusto. I began to go to the headquarters every morning. (*OMC* 103)

With these words Durr describes her ideological position as that of a proto-feminist who after having experienced in her own flesh and bone the demands of southern womanhood and having successfully fulfilled the expectations placed on her as a white middle-class girl, begins to open her eyes to the mutilating effects on women of the male supremacist ideology which until then she had embraced without question.

This stage in Durr’s development is especially relevant because it was then that her blind regional allegiance was put seriously into question for

the first time in her life. Her earlier awareness of the socioeconomic ruin around her in the early 1930s had awakened her social restlessness, but it had not shaken the foundations of her loyalty to the traditional southern ideology. In contrast, when Durr aligns herself with the Women's Division to vindicate women's political rights, she can no longer lay the whole blame on the "Yankee corporations" representing modern northern industrialism; quite on the contrary she is forced to point to the old southern tradition as the actual source of "the role that *Southern* girls had to play" (*OMC* 103, emphasis added). The South, its institutions, its customs and its ideology are now put under serious scrutiny in Durr's mind, which causes an incipient fissure in her faith in the sacrosanct southern order. This fissure, which was "still gestating inside of [her]" then, will reach its true magnitude when Durr completes her vindication by adding the race parameter to the gender one, thus transforming her original repudiation of the *male* supremacist ideology into a repudiation of the *white male* supremacist ideology pervading the South.

But when Durr started fighting against the poll tax she was just thinking of the rights of the white women in the South since, as she admits, "[t]here was no mention in the Democratic Committee at that time of black people. And there were no Negroes around the Women's Division" (*OMC* 102). Although years earlier as a student at Wellesley Durr had seen herself forced to "[break] the Southern taboos" by eating at the same table with a Negro girl, an experience which, as she confesses, "had a tremendous effect on [her]" (*OMC* 58), her confrontation with Clark Foreman on the question of racial equality in the 1930s—just after having declared herself "something of a feminist"—gives proof of her absolute lack of interest in the defense of the rights of black people, and her still strong adherence to the white supremacist ideological standards of her region:

Clark is not tactful at times. He said, "You know, you are just a white, Southern, bigoted, prejudiced, provincial girl." Oh, he just laid me out. I got furious and I said, "You are going back on all the traditions of the South. You, a Howell of Georgia, going back on all of it. What do you think of the Civil War? What did we stand for?" White supremacy, of course. (*OMC* 104)

As Durr herself explains, both she and her husband had been "brought up to think that all black people were inferior" even if both had been raised by black women whom they "adored" and "trusted" and "on whom [their] lives depended" (*OMC* 104). As her reaction to Clark Foreman's proposals on racial equality makes evident, she was still far from abandoning her white supremacist ideology.

Surprisingly, after this “stormy beginning” the Durrs kept meeting the Foremans, and partly thanks to her relationship with them, Virginia began to meet more and more black people in Washington. As a prototypical southern girl and woman, Durr was used to having black people around since her early childhood in Alabama, but they were all servants whose apparently submissive attitude could only confirm her white supremacist perspective.⁵ In Washington, the situation was different since she began to meet African Americans who excelled in different kinds of jobs and in activities from which black people had been traditionally barred in the South because of their alleged lack of intellectual refinement and sophisticated artistic skills. In her memoir, Durr recalls Mattiwilda Dobbs’s success as an opera soprano singer in Washington years before she sang at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1956, and she remembers how on that occasion she herself “served the tea to this black family—quite a reversal of roles for me, as you can imagine” (*OMC* 105). But in spite of experiences like this, Durr was still mainly concerned with the socioeconomic effects of the Great Depression and the rights of white women in the South.

After the tragic death of her three-year-old son in 1938, Durr started attending Bob La Follette’s Senate subcommittee hearings on civil liberties where she was terribly upset to discover that “some of the leading men of Birmingham,” who were “[her] father’s friends and [her] friends’ fathers,” who “had been so sweet to [her] all [her] life” and whom she “had been brought up to think highly of” (*OMC* 110), were actually guilty of the crimes they were accused of, such as “holding people incommunicado or having them beaten up and disappear” (*OMC* 110). She was thus forced to assume that even concerning socioeconomic conditions, the blame could not be blindly laid on the “Yankee corporations,” since some of the most respectable members of the social southern elite had conspired with them, thus contributing to the ongoing spectacle of misery, labor repression and brutality in the South. This is the reason why Durr declares that the hearings were the place “where [she] got [her] education” (*OMC* 108), since there she was brutally exposed to a truth she had never envisioned before: the evidence that the pillars of the southern social order that until then had remained unquestionable for her were as rotten as the purely capitalistic interests of the Yankee corporations. Meanwhile, she kept working on the 50–50 plan of the Women’s Division and against the poll

⁵ The practice of dissemblance as a means to obtain benefits from their masters had characterized the attitude of some black servants since the antebellum period: “slaves constructed masks of simplemindedness and sycophancy, loyalty and laziness to play to their owners’ fantasies and desires while securing very material benefits . . . in return” (Hale 16).

tax, but not on behalf of the rights of the African American people yet; as she herself admits: “The race issue was not my primary interest at that time” (*OMC* 114).

Surrounded by New Dealers in Washington, Durr could never partake of the generalized feeling of antipathy that most southerners manifested towards Roosevelt’s program, which marked for her another point of departure from the mainstream southern ideology. For this reason, when she learnt that Joe Gelders and Lucy Randolph Mason with the President’s support were organizing a meeting that would bring together “the New Deal elements in the South, the labor unions, the people who were benefiting by the New Deal, like the WPA people” (*OMC* 119), she decided to join efforts with them and thus became a participant in the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare held in Birmingham, Alabama, in November 1938, where black people also had representation: “I understand the Mrs. Roosevelt was the one who insisted that blacks be included, and Mary McLeod Bethune was her emissary” (*OMC* 120). Eleanor Roosevelt’s overt defiance of the laws of segregation during the conference—“[she] got a little folding chair and put it right in the middle of the aisle” since “[she] said she refused to be segregated,” and “[she] carried the little folding chair with her wherever she went” (*OMC* 121)—did not leave Durr indifferent. Neither was she immune to Mrs Mary McLeod Bethune’s courageous determination to be called “Mrs Bethune,” which, according to Durr, “sounds like a small thing now, but that was a big dividing line. A Negro woman in Birmingham, Alabama, was called Mrs. at a public meeting” (*OMC* 121). The Conference became thus a landmark which signaled the first integrationist steps in Durr’s development and highly contributed to her growing awareness of what a “terrible thing” was “to be white and have to think that everybody who wasn’t white was inferior, to look down on them and think they smelled bad and were common and vulgar” (*OMC* 121).

When Durr describes the process that led her to “come around to thinking that segregation was terrible” (*OMC* 121) she uses the term “osmosis” (*OMC* 121), and relates it to the effect of her having met Mrs Bethune and “other Negro people at the Foreman’s house” (*OMC* 121) like the Dobbs. As suggested by the term “osmosis,” these encounters did not cause Durr’s sudden epiphanic awakening to the injustice of segregation, but their effects gradually filtered into her mind and infiltrated her ideology causing an irrevocable alteration in her perception of the Jim Crow South. As already noted, in her memoirs Durr confesses that when she started meeting many of these black people she was exclusively interested in fighting against labor exploitation and for the voting rights of the white women. In fact, she seems to have given little thought to

the evils of racial segregation until the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, where for the first time she found herself among an integrated group of people with representatives of the African American community (*OMC* 120). They were called “reds” and despised as communists, but Durr was aware that it was the fact that there were white people and black people peacefully sitting together that caused the reaction of the white population of Alabama and eventually the interference of the police “saying anybody who broke the segregation law of Alabama would be arrested and taken to jail” (*OMC* 121). Inspired by women such as Mrs Roosevelt and Mrs Bethune, Durr was thus beginning to realize the “contradictory feelings” at the basis of segregation: “We grew up with such contradictory feelings. ‘I loved dear old Suzy. She raised me from a baby and she treated me like a mama. She is the sweetest thing in the world.’ But, ‘Of course, I wouldn’t sit by her son on the bus’” (*OMC* 122).

In spite of this growing opposition to the segregation laws and practices, Durr’s main interest in the late 1930s and the 1940s was still the promotion of the rights of women in the South through the abolition of the poll tax (*OMC* 126). Even after the Women’s Division was forbidden to fight for this end (*OMC* 115), Durr went on working for this cause as vice-president of the poll tax committee—officially called the Civil Rights Committee (*OMC* 152). In August 1941 this committee had grown so much that it was separated from the Southern Conference, which then became one of its members. The committee was now called National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (*OMC* 152–53), and Durr was its vice-chairman. According to her, the NCAPT concentrated on the struggle against the poll tax, and although it had the support of several African American associations and its members opposed segregation, racism was not a central issue for them. The poll tax committee was backed by the White House—at least for a while⁶—and kept getting support from different groups—mainly women’s associations, labor unions and African American associations—until its dissolution in 1948.⁷ Although they got to introduce an anti-poll tax bill in Congress several times, they were never successful mainly because of the opposition of the southern politicians, who were constantly red-baiting and race-baiting the NCAPT. Durr herself was called “a Communist, a nigger-loving Communist” (*OMC* 163) by some of them. She knew that the actual source of the problem between the NCAPT and her fellow southerners was their obsession with the race issue

⁶ In late 1941 “Roosevelt needed the Southern senators so badly for his foreign policy that he decided he couldn’t offend them on such issues as the poll tax” (*OMC* 158).

⁷ The poll tax was abolished in 1964 by Constitutional amendment.

rather than communism: “Southern congressmen immediately translated the fight against the poll tax into the race issue” (*OMC* 179), since they saw this fight as a potential step forward in the black people’s access to their voting rights and so as a potential threat for the cheap labor that blacks represented.

Just before the dissolution of the NCAPT Durr had met Henry Wallace and was so positively impressed that she decided to campaign for him. One of the aspects that Durr admired in him was his refusal to speak to segregated audiences in the South during his campaign, which was usually the source of much trouble: “Wallace went all through the South . . . and he refused to speak to segregated audiences. They got tomatoes and other things thrown at them because of it. He struck a great blow against segregation right then and there” (*OMC* 197–99). It was the first time a candidate for the presidency of the U.S. showed so openly his determination to fight segregation, and Durr was especially proud of Wallace for this reason, but she got terribly disappointed when black people did not vote for him (*OMC* 201). Although it was still mostly a collateral effect of the other ambitious projects which she was undertaking, Durr’s opposition to segregation was becoming so evident that in her memoirs she admits that in the early 1950s she was reluctant to go back to Alabama because of the race issue, since she was certain her friends and relatives there did not share her views on the topic (*OMC* 224). In spite of her reluctance they went back in 1951 after a short period of time living in Denver.

These were the years when McCarthyism was reaching its peak, and red-baiting finally struck Durr directly when she was called to New Orleans to appear before the Internal Security Subcommittee during the Jim Eastland hearings in 1954 (*OMC* 255). These hearings were primarily a manifestation of the red scare that was affecting the whole country, but as Durr acknowledges, in the South the fear of communism was deeply rooted in the fear of racial integration, and always secondary to it: the Brown vs Board of Education decision was being discussed by the Supreme Court, and most southern politicians, Jim Eastland among them, tried to make the most of the situation by persuading southerners of the association of communism and racial integration.

Although the hearings initially represented a nightmare for Durr and her family, they eventually became a source of liberation for her. As a consequence of her husband’s poor health they had been living with his family in Montgomery since they had returned to Alabama, and out of respect for them, who were a traditional, conservative southern family, Durr had resigned from all associations and had kept quiet about political and race issues as expected from a “nice, proper Southern lady”

(*OMC* 271). But when Durr was called to New Orleans she was forced to break her silence, which triggered her return to the public political scene, and her subsequent liberation from her mask as a “nice, proper Southern lady.” Thus, when “the Brown decision came down . . . all hell broke loose” (*OMC* 272) in Alabama, and her political action naturally turned to desegregation. From Durr’s perspective, the brutality of the white reaction against desegregation made of this struggle a nationwide issue, since it forced the federal government to get involved and back up integration by enforcing the decisions of the Supreme Court (*OMC* 275), and this eventually brought the ideological contradiction of the southern conflict to the fore.

According to Durr, the red scare and the fear of red-baiting which McCarthyism had spread all over the nation had never been so strong in the South, where red-baiting had always been combined with but secondary to race-baiting: in the South fighting against segregation had usually gone together with being suspected of communism and thus of treason. But the 1950s meant the beginning of the cold war period, and in Durr’s own words

[t]he whole basis of the cold war was that communism meant dictatorship and capitalism meant democracy. How could anyone say that capitalism was the best system in the world when the whole Southern part of the United States was segregated and Negroes had no rights at all? It created a great dilemma for the United States. (*OMC* 284)

As a result of this “dilemma” and of the nationwide dimension acquired by the southern racial conflict, in the rest of the nation the struggle against segregation began to be identified with freedom and democracy rather than communism. Moreover, according to Durr, Martin Luther King’s political strategy highly contributed to destabilize the association between the Negro movement and communism by bringing the church into the game: “I always thought King was a great politician. He started the movement in the churches, so when the people started trying to red-bait the Negro movement, they had to go into churches and red-bait Jesus Christ—pretty difficult to do” (*OMC* 284). Durr suggests that for this reason from its onset red-baiting the Civil Rights Movement became difficult in the South.

From Durr’s perspective segregation was based on two basic notions: the fear of the sexual association of white women and black men, and the idea that blacks were diseased (*OMC* 288). In her memoirs, she repeatedly expresses her disgust at the widespread idea that the white women who were fighting segregation did so because they wanted to have sex with black men, and she attacks this argument on the basis that it was insulting and

degrading for everybody—white men included, since it takes for granted that white women would prefer black men for their sexual attributes if they were given the chance to choose. Thus Durr dismantles the denigrating association of African Americans with the most basic animal instincts, which constituted the basis of one of the two main stereotypes affecting black people, that of the brutish black rapist—and its female counterpart, the Jezebel.⁸ But Durr finds it much more difficult to see beyond the other main stereotype affecting African Americans, that of the faithful docile servant; in fact, she resorts to this image to counter those arguments that promoted segregation on the basis that blacks were diseased, thus showing her good intentions but also her blindness to the destructive effects of this stereotype and of the paternalistic ideology behind it:

You know, I was brought up to be a Southern lady, and it dawned on me how rude it was to think that a black was too dirty and smelled too bad to sit by me. I had been raised by them and sat in their laps, slept with them and kissed them all my life. This was what was so crazy about the South. (OMC 121–122)

Hobson uses this passage to justify his opinion that Durr's "conversion to racial justice . . . came about . . . because of her belief that segregation was morally wrong, but also because she believed that it was, quite simply, bad manners," which from his perspective proves her to be "a racial paternalist, in some measure" (125). I suspect that there is a subtle irony in Durr's reference to her upbringing as a Southern lady—a role which she elsewhere criticizes and rejects—and also in her subsequent attempt to counter segregation on the basis that it is bad manners: Durr seems to be sarcastically exposing the contradictions of Southern segregation by presenting it as a violation of the demand of kindness and graciousness expected from a southern lady. But the tone of irony is replaced by a nostalgic one when Durr turns her eyes to her childhood past to briefly recall her memories of childhood racial innocence: here she blindly accepts the surface appearance of racial harmony and mutual affection traditionally associated to the image of the faithful servant, mammy, without questioning the veracity of this myth.⁹ Durr needs to believe that these memories

⁸ According to Deborah Gray White, "[b]lack men and women were thought to have such insatiable sexual appetites that they had to go beyond the boundaries of their race to get satisfaction" (38).

⁹ After the publication of Trudier Harris's *From Mammies to Militants. Domesticity in Black American Literature* (1982) and Deborah White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), several scholars have devoted their efforts to deconstruct the mammy image. For a more detailed analysis

of racial innocence are genuine and she clings to them firmly to justify what she identifies as the basic contradiction of segregation: the contrast between the feeling of protection and affection that most southerners like her got from their close relationship with the black servants who raised them as children, and the demands of segregation and separation that ruled race relationships in their adulthood. Durr bases her argument against segregation on this paradox without realizing that such a contradiction was mainly apparent: if she had stopped to consider the situation, first she would have realized that rather than contradicting the feeling of racial harmony evoked by her memories of her childhood relationship with the black servants, the southern segregated system actually depended both ideologically and economically on the presence of black domestics often idealized as mammy at home, and as a consequence she would have discovered the fragility of her own idealized childhood relationship with the black servants and of the mammy image.

In her autobiography, Durr does not hesitate to identify the economic reasons lurking behind the ideology of white male supremacy which constituted the basis of southern segregation: segregation was ultimately a means to deprive Negroes of any right and any power,¹⁰ and thus keep them as a source of cheap labor since “[c]heap labor was the great selling point of the South. Every Southern state, every chamber of commerce, and every corporation thought the way to make the South prosperous was cheap labor” (*OMC* 179). But it was not until much later in her life—if ever—that Durr began to look closer than any “chamber of commerce” and any corporation, and became aware of her own lifelong dependence on the cheap labor provided by black domestics. Long hours and short wages conditioned the real lives of all domestic workers in the South not only in Durr’s childhood, but also afterwards when she herself became a white employer of black domestic employees (Jones 127–28; Sharpless xiii, 8, 65–87). Although she admits a certain feeling of shame for the low wages she paid to her domestics—“I feel a little ashamed when I think what we paid the servants” (*OMC* 100), in her memoirs Durr never denounces this reality of labor exploitation, and never acknowledges its contribution to

of the pernicious effects of the mammy image, the real conditions of work of black domestics in the segregation period and their relationship with their white employers, see Hale (85–119), Jones (124–50), Manring (1–34), McElya (74–115, 160–206), Sharpless (129–72), Wallace-Sanders (1–12), White (46–61).

¹⁰ Hale analyzes segregation partly as whites’ reaction to the development of a black middle-class: “Whites created the culture of segregation in large part to counter black success, to make a myth of absolute racial difference, to stop the rising” (21).

the perpetuation of the same color line which she was otherwise struggling to destroy. Curiously, when she deals with the servant problem and refers to the white employers' generalized suspicion in the 1930s that their domestics "had formed Eleanor Clubs and were being encouraged to push white people off the sidewalks" (*OMC* 114),¹¹ she does so not to denounce the labor conditions of the domestic workers but to express how much she "hated for Mrs. Roosevelt to be so maligned" in the South (*OMC* 114). Somehow emulating the New Deal's disregard of domestic service,¹² Durr does not seem aware of the fact that the low wages—or no wages at all¹³—allotted to the help conspired with the ideology of segregation to keep blacks "in their place."

Although black domestics—especially those who had children—worked mainly for the welfare of their families, and they "refused to subordinate completely their own family interests to the demands of a white employer" (Jones 128), the paradoxical truth was that "[p]reserving and providing for the family frequently meant leaving it for long hours," since white employers expected their domestics to put the employers' demands over their own family needs and often "tried to disregard the fact that their cooks had lives outside the boundaries of their employers' homes" (Sharpless 110). As a consequence, balancing work and family was extremely difficult for most black domestics. On the one hand, since these women had to work long hours, they usually had to trust the care of their children to others or even leave them alone (Jones 129), which often complicated their rearing, and on the other hand, since they had to work for low wages, the practice of "composite income" was almost unavoidable (Sharpless 72–73), which most of the times forced black children to stop attending school and start working earlier than white children, and this inevitably limited their chances of socioeconomic improvement. As Niewiadomska-Flis concludes, this "systematic abuse and discrimination"

¹¹ After analyzing the white employers' opposition to organized labor in the case of the black domestics, as well as the difficulties that black women actually encountered to organize themselves, Sharpless suggests that "[j]ust as they had during the period before World War I, employers' imaginations remained more active than organizing African American workers in the 1940s" (85). The FBI itself concluded that "the stories of the so-called 'ELEANOR CLUBS' are the result of widespread rumors without foundation and fact" (Sharpless 86).

¹² Domestic service was excluded from the federal wage and labor laws which were developed to protect the rights of workers in the 1930s, as well as from the Social Security Act passed in 1935 (Sharpless 86–87).

¹³ Although it was rare, according to Sharpless some domestics worked only for food and shelter even in the twentieth century (72).

was designed “to keep the Black help at a subsistence level” (66),¹⁴ which ultimately meant that in spite of the black domestics’ efforts to provide their children with better future opportunities through education (Jones 97), they could hardly ever succeed in changing their status quo. In turn, this perpetuation of the southern socioeconomic order with black people as providers of cheap labor served to justify the ideology of white supremacy and thus to keep the color-line secure. In spite of her feeling of shame at the low wages she herself paid to her domestics, Durr never reflects on this reality and thus never acknowledges her part in this contrivance.

The economic exploitation of black domestics explains their presence in so many white homes—even in not affluent ones¹⁵—in the South, where from an ideological perspective black domestics wearing the mammy mask became essential for the racial training of white children in the ideology of white male supremacy. As Hale accurately explains, during the Jim Crow period “[t]he white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world” through the employment of African American domestic labor (94). It was at home that white children began to learn the meaning of race, racial identity and racial difference, which constituted the “primal scene of the culture of segregation” (96), and in white southerners’ memories black domestics, nostalgically idealized as mummies, usually “haunted these scenes of racial learning” (97). According to Hale, black domestics functioned both as markers of whiteness since “being white meant having black help” (103), and as “conduits through which [racial] identities were reproduced within white children” (105). Thus, “the relationships between white southerners and black women domestics became crucial to the reproduction of white supremacy” (115) in the segregated South, where paradoxically white children learnt whiteness from black women (104) by gradually internalizing the paternalistic conviction of the inferior status of blacks.

Black domestics’ involuntary contribution to the culture of segregation was intensified by the white southerners’ tendency to idealize these women’s role in their childhood memories to make them fit the traditional mammy image, which constituted one of the two stereotypes—Jezebel was the other one—affecting black women: mammy stories proliferated between 1890 and 1940, and in them “pre- and postwar images fused and mammy

¹⁴ As Susan Tucker explains, widely spread practices such as toting and gift giving contributed to keep the black help at a subsistence level (146).

¹⁵ Hale observes that black domestics’ wages were so low that even white mill workers and “women who lived on small farms . . . had access to black domestic labor” (102).

became the crucial nurturer, protector, and teacher of white children” (Hale 98). Mammy became again a symbol of racial harmony through her tacit assumption of white supremacy manifested in her devotion to her white charges and her white family (Wallace-Sanders 10, 18, 24; White 46–61). Thus, although “as the twentieth century opened, the actual domestic workers had little connection to the mammy figure that white southerners increasingly celebrated” (Hale 98), this image shaped the expectations of the white society for black women in the real world:¹⁶ as a consequence, “black domestic workers . . . faced a white popular culture that persistently conflated or compared their work and their lives with the fictitious mammy figure” (McElya 208). Regardless of the socioeconomic factors that actually conditioned the white employer-black employee relationship, white southerners persistently clung to their mammies in their memories of childhood innocence. And Durr was no exception.

In her autobiography, Durr counters without effort the stereotype of the animalistic black rapist; she proclaims the absurdity of denying black people intellectual and artistic skills, as well as moral values; she denounces the deprivation of rights of black people in a country that was supposed to be the leader of the free, democratic world; and she even establishes a connection between the southern rejection of the anti-poll tax movement and the southern dependence on the cheap labor provided by black workers. However, she fails to see that her own account of her idyllic childhood playing with black children and being taken care of by a black nurse is mainly an idealized romance which actually rested on black exploitation: that is, on the cheap labor provided by blacks, in this case black domestics. In her memoir Durr insists on clinging to mammy and remains blind to the fact that the “[m]ammy image is fully as misleading as that of Jezebel” (White 49). In other words, she chooses to ignore that the image of the faithful slave/servant/mammy represented as much a violation of black identity as that of the black beast rapist—and Jezebel—which served as an excuse for the ongoing “lynching spectacles.” As McElya states,

African American activists and journalists charged that honeyed testaments of love for mammy swelled from the same bloodlust and white supremacist sentiment that fueled race riots, lynchings, rapes, and other abuses of black people. The figure did not stand in opposition to this violence, as the UDC claimed, but was very much a part of it. (160)

¹⁶ According to McElya, “the long-standing national romance with the plantation idyll and its narrative of the faithful slave also shaped the desires and expectations of white employers outside the South who hired recently migrated black women” (214).

Like White and McElya, most scholars on the mammy image have insisted on the performative essence of such a mask and the gap separating it from the real feelings and conditions of life of most domestics: Wallace-Sanders defines the mammy-charge relationship as a “sentimentalized romance” which “trumps the reality of lived experience” (16); similarly Manring suggests that “the real woman who would be the basis for Aunt Jemima seems trapped in the amber of southern history, her image well maintained but the reality of her life open to interpretation” (19); Hale explains the popularity of this mask in the segregation period as a product of the whites’ imagination to justify the ideology of white male supremacy and promote the fiction of continuity between the Old and the New South (Hale 85–88), and like Sharpless, she also acknowledges the contribution of the forced practice of dissemblance by black women to the performance (Hale 16–17; Sharpless 145–46). But, like many other southerners, Durr seems to have “missed the performance” (Hale 17), and for this reason in her memoir she emphatically brandishes her memories of having “been raised by [black domestics] and [sitting] in their laps, [sleeping] with them and [kissing] them” (*OMC* 122) as weapons to fight segregation, without even questioning the real implications of these proofs of familiarity and affection. Thus, in contrast with Lillian Smith’s reflections in *Killers of the Dream*,¹⁷ Durr’s recollections of her mammy, Nursie, seem to remain untouched by her adult awareness of the evils of white male supremacy and segregation.

In her autobiography Durr’s rendering of her relationship with Nursie is a compendium of the most stereotypical mammy features:

Nursie was a second mother to me, as black nurses were to many Southern white children. I was devoted to Nursie. She was as much a symbol of safety to me as my mother was. She took care of me completely—even bathed and dressed me. Nursie put me to bed at night, and her little girl, Sarah, who was just my age, slept with me quite often. (*OMC* 14)

Nursie not only took care of the young Virginia, but she was also a source of protection and affection for the girl as befitted her role as mammy. Moreover, the image of the white girl Virginia sharing her bed with the black girl Sarah completes Durr’s nostalgic recollection of a time of childhood racial innocence previous to the learning of the meaning of race. Such a learning process started for her in the family plantation in Union Springs in the summer when Virginia turned seven and she was

¹⁷ Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* and Katharine DuPre Lumpkin’s *The Making of a Southerner* are usually mentioned as examples of the traumatic process of learning the meaning of race at home (see Hale 94–98, 117; Wallace-Sanders 21).

informed that she could not celebrate her birthday by having a barbecue in the backyard with the black children as she had done until then: “my mother and grandmother and aunts all said I had to have my birthday in the front yard and have just white children. No black children could come to the party” (*OMC* 16). Although it was ultimately agreed that she could have a barbecue in the backyard with the black children in the morning and a birthday party in the front yard with the white children in the afternoon, things did not go well: firstly, her cousin Elizabeth insulted Sarah during the barbecue, inspiring a furious reaction from Virginia, and then Virginia had a temper fit at her birthday party in front of “all these strange white children” (*OMC* 17). When “[that] night at the supper table, my aunt said I was the worst child she had ever known” (*OMC* 17), Virginia threw a knife at her, and when she was sent away from the table, she could find refuge only in Nursie’s lap. Virginia’s temper fits represent her resistance to the process of learning the meaning of race, and significantly when she sees her racial innocence—her “idyllic days” (*OMC* 16)—threatened she takes refuge in her mammy, that symbol of the “integrated feelings [and] integrated living” (Hale 117–18) which were allowed only in childhood. But the comfort of the “happy integrated days of childhood” which Virginia could symbolically find in Nursie’s lap came abruptly to an end when the black woman was insulted by Aunt May and neither Durr’s mother nor her grandmother came to her defense.

Aunt May, who had married an Irish man and was living in the North, functions in Durr’s childhood memories as an element of discord in the otherwise peaceful life at the old family plantation in Union Springs, a place especially attached to the bliss of childhood racial innocence. The presence of Aunt May in the plantation disturbs the “idyllic” racial integration offered to children there: significantly she tries to force the black children to call Durr’s sister Miss Josephine instead of Sis as she was usually called by both white and black children; it is no coincidence that she is at the family plantation when Virginia is not allowed to celebrate her birthday with the black children; and eventually, her criticism of Virginia’s intimacy with Nursie on the premise that “all those black women are diseased” (*OMC* 18) causes Nursie to leave, which triggers Virginia’s final awakening to racial awareness and segregation. The loss of Nursie, her mammy, meant for her as for many other southerners, the loss of childhood innocence and the subsequent immersion in the ideology of segregation:

After that summer in Union Springs when I turned seven, I went to school where there were only white children. . . . I was taught by the environment and by my mother that you can’t call a black woman a lady. . . . little by little, I was taught that they were not like us. (19)

Thus, Aunt May embodies in Durr's memories the culture of segregation which brought Virginia's state of blissful racial innocence to an end.

Paradoxically, the process of immersion in the segregated system triggered by this loss of racial innocence was not complete until as adults "white southerners . . . [traded] the real African American women who had nurtured them for sentimental mammy stories, mammy monuments, literary representations like Scarlett's mammy, and even mammy-sponsored biscuits and flour" (Hale 118). Following Lillian Smith's reflections on her own personal experience in *Killers of the Dream*, Hale's words suggest that by purposely idealizing their relationship with their black nurses to make them fit the fictitious mammy image, adult white southerners tried to legitimate their disregard for the reality of these black women, thus condemning their true selves to oblivion: "I learned to use a soft voice to oil my words of superiority. I learned to cheapen with tears and sentimental talk of 'my old mammy' one of the profound relationships of my life" (Smith 29). Here Smith reaffirms her relationship with her black nurse as "one of the profound relationships of [her] life," but she also acknowledges how much she contributed to its perversion by observing it through the prism of the mammy myth, and this realization allows her to explore in depth the inconsistencies behind this image. In contrast with Smith, in her autobiography Durr never seems to suspect that her image of Nursie may be animated by fiction and sentimentality: probably misled both by the white southerners' tendency to idealize mammy and the black domestics' concomitant practice of dissemblance, Durr never questions or explores the feeling of mutual devotion between her and Nursie, not even when she recalls experiences that should have contributed to her enlightenment such as the episode of Nursie's leaving or the anecdote about "Mrs Spraggs."

In spite of the trauma which it meant for her as a child, as an adult Durr praises Nursie's decision to leave, but just as a dignified reaction to Aunt May's insult and to her mother's and grandmother's silence. It is true that with her attitude and determination Nursie is primarily vindicating her dignity as a human being against Aunt May's insulting words, but she is also asserting her independence from Durr's family: the rhetoric of faithfulness, loyalty, mutual affection and devotion between the black mammy and the white family gets suspended in this episode which thus lays bare the mainly professional basis of the relationship. Virginia's mother's and grandmother's silence betrays the truth that racial allegiance surpasses any other feeling of loyalty in the South, and accordingly it exposes the fragile artificiality of the bond of affection binding the white family and the black nurse. Nursie's leaving simply ratifies the fact that being Virginia's nurse was primarily a job for her, and that the affection that she surely felt for her white charge was not so unconditional as Durr had ever

imagined, and did not at all surpass the love she felt for Sarah, her own daughter, as expected from a mammy figure.¹⁸ As a child Durr simply took her “little cocoon of love and devotion and care” with Nursie as a “second mother” (*OMC* 14) for granted, and as an adult she keeps doing so since she never engages in a fruitful dialogue with these memories to explore the true implications of Nursie’s devotion to her and of her leaving. She never realizes that by leaving, Nursie is not only vindicating her status as a free woman, but also the professional basis of her relationship with Virginia and her family; and since it happens when Virginia is being first exposed to the demands of racial segregation, Nursie is also showing her repudiation of the ideology of segregation and probably trying “to protect her daughter from the pain of becoming the material upon which [Virginia] practices her own racial identity” (Hale 103).¹⁹

Years afterwards, when she loses the opportunity of seeing Nursie again because she does not realize that a certain “Mrs Spraggs” is her beloved mammy (*OMC* 18), Durr acknowledges her “backwardness,” but again fails to engage in a true exploration of the situation. While she was working to abolish the poll tax in Washington, Durr learnt from one of her colleagues, Mrs Spraggs, that the latter’s mother-in-law—also called Mrs Spraggs—had known her as a child and wanted to see her. Since she could not remember having ever met someone called Mrs Spraggs in the past, Durr failed to see her. When shortly afterwards she learnt that this Mrs Spraggs was her beloved Nursie, it was too late: Nursie was already dead. Apart from her backwardness, this anecdote evinces that Durr’s actual knowledge of Nursie had very serious deficiencies, which may even cast doubt on the authenticity of their mutual devotion. However, Durr does not seem to suspect that her ignorance of Nursie’s complete name can be interpreted as evidence of her ignorance of Nursie’s true identity beyond the mammy mask: she loved Nursie—the mammy mask—but she knew nothing about Mrs Spraggs—Nursie’s actual name representing her identity as an individual. Thus, in contrast to Smith, Durr fails to see that the love of mammy—Nursie—is a form of violence because it depends on the erasure of the black domestics’ true self—Alice Spraggs.

¹⁸ Wallace-Sanders focuses her analysis of the mammy image on black nurses’ “dual role as surrogate and biological mother[s]” (7), and explains that mammy’s “devotion for the children she cares for is best illustrated by her disregard for her own children” (8).

¹⁹ Hale uses these words to explain Aunt Hester’s attitude in the short story “Little White Girl” (1931) by Sara Haardt. Although the situation is different—Virginia does not repudiate Sarah as Susie does with Pinky in the short story, Nursie could probably foresee that this would happen sooner or later.

According to McElya, one of the most impressive mass manifestations of the black domestics' challenge to the "faithful slave narrative" was the Montgomery Bus Boycott (210). Durr was living in Montgomery and was a good friend of Mrs Parks when the bus boycott started, and she supported Mrs Parks's decision to "challenge the bus ordinance on constitutional grounds" (*OMC* 281). Afterwards, she was among the white women who supported the boycott by offering black domestics a ride when they were walking, and she was well aware of the fact that

[a] vast deceit went on. Everybody knew everybody else was lying, but to save face, they had to lie. The black women had to say they weren't taking any part in the boycott. The white women had to say that their maids didn't take any part in the boycott. (*OMC* 283)

Durr relates an anecdote involving Mary, her mother-in-law's old cook, "a passionate advocate of the boycott," who nevertheless denied any part in it. When asked about her attitude

[she] laughed and said, "Well, I tell you, Mr. Cliff, I tell you, I learned one thing in my life and that is, when your hand's in the lion's mouth, it's just better to pat it on the head." That expressed the feeling in the black community. The black women needed those jobs. They weren't paid very much, but that's all the income many of them had. They couldn't afford to say, "I'm supporting the boycott." (*OMC* 283)

Mary's words expose the truth about black domestics and their forced practice of dissemblance, and although Durr is well aware of the performance going on in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955–56, there is no evidence in her autobiography that Mary's explanation has any effect on Durr's perception of the familiarity between white children and black domestics or on her conviction of their mutual devotion: she never elaborates on Mary's lesson and never dares to reconsider this devotion under the light of such a lesson. In fact, as an adult Durr resorts again to the mammy figure to describe her relationship with Mrs Bethune: "Mrs. Bethune translated into the black woman who looked after me and became my protector" (*OMC* 19). This proves that Durr never attempts to deconstruct the scene of idealized racial integration incarnated by the mammy image (*OMC* 44); as a consequence, she mistakenly recalls scenes of familiarity with black domestics to counter segregation without realizing that the romance of racial integration rested on the same violence that kept segregation going.

Nonetheless, although Durr does not succeed in disentangling her childhood memories from the grips of the mammy myth and southern paternalism, in her life she travelled a long distance from her early

assumption of the ideology of white male supremacy to her later support of the Civil Rights Movement. Her life experience and her ideological development during her childhood, adolescence and youth were determined by the traditional social expectations for white girls of the former planter class: she was raised by a mammy, learnt the meaning of race as a child and grew up to become a white middle-class housewife. But evidence of the misery caused by the Great Depression forced her to open her eyes to the reality of economic and social injustice around her, and led her to adopt an active attitude. She first channeled her efforts to fight for the political rights of southern white women and joined the anti-poll tax movement to undermine male supremacy in the South; but her association with this movement made her gradually aware of the evils of segregation and white supremacy until she became a supporter of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Although blurred by her disregard for the manifestations of racism and white supremacy in the domestic sphere and her parallel blindness to the distorting effects of the mammy image, Durr courageously repudiated segregation in the southern public scene, thereby confirming her genuine commitment to what she considered her ultimate goal: the denunciation of “the exploitation of human beings by other human beings” (OMC 131).

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